

Psychological Injuries in Commonwealth workplaces



Common causes, the experience of employees and effective prevention methods



Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)



- CPSU represents staff who work in the APS, NTPS, ACT Gov, Telstra, Australia Post and other Commonwealth Authorities
- Vast majority of CPSU members covered under Comcare including APS, ACT Gov, Telstra, Australia Post, CSL and other Commonwealth Authorities





Revised Definitions of “disease” and “injury”

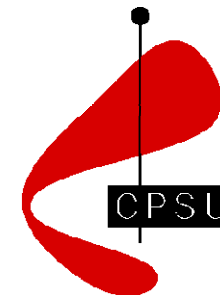
- Definition of “disease” changed and employer must now take into account past mental health
- Exclusions to compensation in respect of an “Injury” changed from “reasonable disciplinary action” to “reasonable administrative action”
- Much broader definition of actions which, when taken, exclude claims for compensation
- No of rejected stress claims has increased significantly
- Resulted in a reduction in premiums (objective of the changes to the legislation)



Costs of mental stress claims

- In 2005/06 mental stress claims accounted for 7.8% of claims but 31.1% of total claim costs
- In 2006/07 mental stress claims accounted for just 8% of all claims but 27% of total claim costs
- Affects operations, staff





Psychological Injuries

- Bullying and harassment
- Customer aggression
- Workload/staffing levels
- Change management
- Lack of employee control over work and work environment
- Lack of consultation about matters affecting employees' working lives





Customer Aggression

- CPSU report: *Securing Centrelink Safety*
- Agencies affected: DVA, CSA, ATO, DHA, ABS
- Also applies to CBA, NAB
- Verbal or physical assault or intimidation directed at customer service employees, damage to office property
- Results in psychological and physical injuries





A shared approach to solutions

- Employees part of solution not the problem: a partnership approach
- Work with Agencies as issues arise rather than confrontational approach
- Shared approach between employees, their representatives and management
- Learn from employees' experiences – consultation



Contributing factors

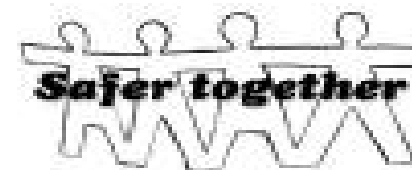
- Inadequate staffing numbers for customer demand for services
- Policies that result in conflict between employees and customers
- Environmental design
- Training and support of employees
- Customers are not educated about unacceptable behaviours





Impacts of customer aggression

- Impacts on worker, any witness, broader workplace, other customers
- Introduces culture of fear and normalisation of risk (“you are not a Centrelink worker unless you have been threatened by a customer”)
- Disrupts service delivery
- The experience of employees



What doesn't work

- Blaming employees including site managers for not being able to 'handle' customer aggression
- Inconsistent policies and approaches to prevention and response – creates confusion
- HSMAAs reducing the standard of OHS co-ordination
- Hard way – confrontational, see unions as third parties so therefore exclude them





Effective Prevention: what will help

- Easy way – contract relationship as per Department of Defence, Tax Office
- Involving employees in creating local strategies and solutions – backed by national structures and direction
- Training and support for employees
- Consistent, clear, understood, policies and procedures
- Robust reporting systems that are consistently used
- OHS committees that value employee and union participation





The way forward

- Acknowledgement of the risk
- Independent review of the risk and effectiveness of management systems
- Shared and cooperative approach to solutions
- OHS is core business
- Code of practice on Dealing with Aggressive Clients
- Consult with employees and their representatives



CPSU – making your workplace safer.

